

The Influence of Distinguished Educators on School Improvement:

A Study of Kentucky's School Intervention Program



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Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, this study is one strand of a larger research effort to understand and strengthen the professional development system available to Kentucky educators. The overall effort is led by Carolyn Witt Jones and conducted by a team of researchers including the authors of this report plus Thomas B. Corcoran, Pamela Coe, and Lois Adams-Rodgers, all of whom contributed to this study.

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the high stakes, high standards educational reform launched in 1990, Kentucky has chosen to invest substantially in building the capacity of schools to improve student achievement. In addition to the significant professional development dollars delegated to schools, Kentucky directs assistance and resources to schools with declining state assessment scores. Unlike many state and large district accountability systems where low performance triggers some form of nominal takeover or reconstitution of the faculty, Kentucky assigns carefully selected and highly trained educators to eligible schools.

Kentucky's intervention in declining schools, known as the School Transformation Assistance and Renewal (STAR) program, aims to help schools improve through intensive technical assistance. Originally called Distinguished Educators (DEs) and now called Highly Skilled Educators (HSEs), these trained educators spend considerable time over a two-year period assisting eligible schools. This report focuses on the STAR program and the DEs prior to the 1998-99 introduction of the HSEs.

We undertook this study as part of a larger research effort to understand the professional development opportunities available to Kentucky educators. We reasoned that if the STAR program was to have its intended effect, it would necessarily influence both formal and informal learning opportunities for school faculties. We were especially motivated to understand what DEs actually did because data from the Kentucky Department of Education showed impressive gains in state assessment scores. Results of the first two-year cycle of DE intervention showed significant gains on the state assessment in all 53 schools that received assistance from a DE, with 34 schools actually meeting or exceeding their goal (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996). In the second two-year cycle, 167 of 188

schools improved their scores (85 exceeded their goal) as did 46 of the original 53 schools.

Because the program has changed in significant ways, we provide some background first on what the program was like when we undertook our study and how it has changed. Then we turn to our study design, findings, and interim conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Under the STAR program, teams of DEs were assigned for varied amounts of time to schools that did not meet their improvement goal. The farther from the goal, the more intensive the intervention. In the 'crisis' schools—those that missed their goal by 5 points or more—schools were assigned two fulltime DEs. In these special cases, DEs were required to evaluate all certified personnel and had the authority to recommend removal. Other eligible schools received DE time ranging from almost fulltime to one day a week. The 'crisis' designation was not used in 1994-96, only in 1996-98.

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS IN STAR PROGRAM¹

	1994-96	1996-98
Crisis	NA	9
Decline	53	79
STAR2	NA	16
Improving Category 2	NA	76
TOTAL	53	180

DEs were expected to help schools implement changes that would lead to increased student achievement. This process included helping schools develop mission statements, conduct needs assessment through analysis of test results and surveys of staff and parents, develop measurable goals and activities to accomplish the goals, and develop a communication plan.

Under STAR, DEs were culled from a rigorous multi-step application process which led to the selection of a highly motivated group of educators. Slightly over half were teachers and the rest evenly split between school and central office administrators. Initial training included two weeks of formal preparation for working with schools, but the essence of training was their own ongoing professional development designed around their experiences working in schools. They met together monthly to develop and revise tools to support their work in schools and to share experiences in using particular strategies and tools. Over a two-year period the original group of DEs attended over 60 days of professional development including development of tools and strategies. As new DEs were brought on, their training focused more on how to use the tools and strategies developed by their predecessors.

Kentucky operated under the STAR program during the second (1994-96) and third (1996-98) assessment cycles. For the 1998-2000 cycle, assistance from Highly Skilled Educators is being provided to schools that request assistance. This shift embodies three fundamental changes in the approach: (1) removal of the authority of the assistance provider to make decisions and evaluate faculty (HSEs make recommendations and school councils do or do not accept them), (2) making the assistance voluntary (until 2002)², and (3) focusing on the lowest performing schools thereby excluding high performing schools that declined. Beginning in 2000-2002, an audit team will review schools as a basis for recommending the need for an HSE. We intend to look at the effects of these changes³.

STUDY DESIGN

The goal of our work was to explore the DE program in greater depth: to learn what DEs did, how they did it, and how teachers and administrators responded to their actions. We

were particularly interested in the ways in which DEs influenced the kinds of professional development available to teachers. We also wanted to know whether the impact of DEs on school faculty and on test scores persisted beyond their presence in the schools.

To answer these questions, we combined a case study sample of schools and a self-administered survey of a much larger random sample. Our sample draws from schools in the first (1994-96) and second (1996-98) rounds of DE interventions.

Our case study sample included a total of 13 schools: five elementary schools, three middle schools, and five high schools. Nine of these schools were served by DEs in the 1994-96 biennium; of these, two failed to improve their scores sufficiently, and continued receiving DE assistance during 1996-98. The remaining four schools in our sample were crisis schools in 1996-98. We selected the schools based on initial performance on the state test, choosing from the lower half of the baseline score distribution. We also selected schools to ensure a mix of elementary, middle, and high school levels and to represent different geographic regions. We visited each case study school during the 1997-98 school year, and interviewed, at a minimum, the principal, three to four teachers identified by the principal, and, in most cases, at least one of the Distinguished Educators serving that school.

Data from the site visits were used to develop a survey instrument for administration to a larger sample of schools receiving DE assistance in 1996-98. We sent surveys to teachers in 55 STAR schools in the winter of the 1998-99 school year. We received a total of 526 responses reflecting an overall response rate of 28 percent. Given this low rate, which we attribute in part to the sheer number of requests these teachers have fielded from multiple research efforts, we have chosen not to report exact figures from the survey.

However, our confidence in the findings is higher than such a response rate would typically warrant because of the high correspondence between the results of the case studies and the surveys. Attachment 1 describes the survey sampling and design in more detail.

Analysis of data from both the case studies and the self-administered survey focused on the following questions:

- (1) What was the overall reaction of educators in the study schools to the DE program?
- (2) To what did teachers attribute their school's low performance?
- (3) What were the major activities of DEs in the study schools?
- (4) How did the DE presence/activities influence professional development?
- (5) What were the results of the DE program in the study schools?
- (6) How did respondents think the DE program could be improved?

FINDINGS

General Reactions to DE Presence

Site visits to 13 schools revealed that faculty in all schools initially reacted with embarrassment to the DE assignment. This embarrassment diminished quickly when benefits and a good relationship with the DE developed. This occurred in nine of the 13 schools (including two of the four crisis schools). There were a few examples of very bad experiences in which positive relationships never developed, or where DEs changed so frequently as to make progress difficult. The match between the school and DE was especially important. Overall, the majority of teachers

to whom we spoke and who responded to the survey agreed that the impact of the DE was positive. High school teachers were more likely to view the DE impact as positive than were elementary and middle school teachers. This difference may be due to a stronger perception among high school teachers that their schools had problems that needed to be addressed. A high school teacher in a crisis school commented:

Our school needed a focus on curriculum. We have been bogged down by major discipline problems in the past. Students and teachers had a morale loss and needed to look ahead, not behind. The test gave us a focus, and the DEs gave our students added motivation. They were essentially cheerleaders for our school. I loved having them here. Although we worked very hard, it was a positive effort. I am thankful for the experience and more confident because of it.

Other studies report similarly positive reactions. A 1997 survey of STAR schools in the first round of intervention found that over 80 percent of responding teachers, principals, superintendents, and Distinguished Educators rated the DE program as effective (Davis, McDonald, & Lyons, 1997). A separate survey of schools participating in the STAR program during the second cycle found that teachers rated highly the DEs' knowledge of the state assessment, fairness in evaluating personnel, emphasis on long-term improvement, and leadership in improvement planning. Respondents were less satisfied with the program's consistency from one DE to the next and its perceived 'one-size-fits-all' approach (Henry, Terry, & Lunney, n.d.). Our respondents overwhelmingly pointed to increased job stress, more time on paperwork, and more hours on the job.

REASONS FOR DECLINING SCORES

The reasons educators give to explain declining performance are important because they suggest the areas where teachers might look for solutions. Attributing declines to those factors over which teachers have little or no influence suggests teachers may have little motivation to change their practices. When asked why their school's test scores had declined, the majority of educators tended to attribute the decline to characteristics of the students and the assessment system. Wakelyn (1999) also reported that schools tended to blame external factors for their poor test performance. Generally, the educators we interviewed and surveyed tended to place responsibility for declining performance on lack of student effort or motivation, lack of parental support, and the testing system itself. Teachers in crisis schools were more likely to mention the testing system; high school teachers were more inclined to place the burden of responsibility on students.

Overall, respondents placed most responsibility for declining test scores on students' lack of effort, low motivation, and low academic ability. However, teachers were more likely to blame the parents than the students for these traits. A teacher at a large urban high school, when asked how the school ended up in decline, commented:

Personally, I think it is because . . . of student background. I have kids with 30 days absence already this semester. We try everything we can to get them here, but if they are not here, there is not much you can do. By the parents not forcing them to come, I really think that is the main thing.

A middle school teacher in a small, agricultural community explained in some detail the relationship between parent attitudes and values and student motivation:

We have a certain group of parents that is going to back you, is going to make their kids do their work, is going to make their kids do good on this test when we have testing days.... I've got other kids that won't study, their parents won't make them study, they don't feel like they need to study because they are going to grow up to be farmers like their fathers. And so, therefore, they don't need an education, their parents don't push them to get an education, so they just write it all off. And I feel like maybe a lack of parental support in various kids pulls our test scores down a lot.

Many educators, particularly in crisis schools, believed that their declining performance was largely due to the way the testing and accountability formula was structured⁴. When we made our initial round of site visits, respondents in nearly half the schools attributed their declining performance to the "good class/bad class" phenomenon, an explanation that also surfaced in the Wakelyn (1999) study. That is, they believed that their baseline score had been set by a relatively high performing group of students, who were followed the next two years by lower performing groups, so that the school could not possibly surpass the original baseline score. As one teacher put it:

My school was in decline simply because of the fact that the students setting the baseline were an unusually large group of gifted and talented students. The base set was quite high. The groups following were more average ability. Teaching methods, quality, knowledge of content, and knowledge of effective teaching strategies have never been a problem at this school.

Another common complaint about the testing program is that it held teachers accountable but not students, so that students had little incentive to do well on the test. As one survey respondent wrote: "Students who fail are passed in the summer with no consequences.

How can anyone in good conscience hold teachers accountable when parents and students aren't?"

In our case study schools we found few teachers who attributed school performance to instructional quality. Similarly, on the survey, factors related to teachers' knowledge and skills were cited by more than half the respondents as *not* a significant influence on test score decline, suggesting that most teachers did not believe that what they did in the classroom played a major role in student performance on the assessment. A majority of teachers, however, were willing to attribute their school's low performance to lack of attention to the testing program, including alignment of curriculum and instruction with the state assessment.

Activities of DEs

The kinds of activities in which DEs engaged were similar across schools, although the amount of time devoted to each differed. Typically, the DE led the school in a needs assessment that included an analysis of state and other assessment data and of survey data from school staff, parents, and teachers. Using this information, the DE helped the school develop an improvement plan that included the identification of professional development needed to accomplish the goals of the plan. Another key planning activity described at several schools was the formation of committees, and the designation of "component managers," to oversee development and implementation of the various components of the plan. This committee structure helped organize the school's work; component managers reported regularly to the school council. The DE also helped locate resources to implement the plan and helped schools decide how to spend the money provided by the STAR program⁵.

DEs also worked with teachers to align the curriculum to the Core Content for

Assessment⁶, helping determine what would be taught at each grade to ensure that all the topics were covered. To help teachers prepare students to answer open response questions similar to those that appear on the assessment, the DEs devised a strategy to help students think through a question and organize information needed to answer it. DEs identified sources of professional development for teachers as well as leading workshops and organizing school-based professional development activities. They also met with district staff, parents, and the community.

The primary differences in how DEs approached their tasks seemed to be in their work with teachers. Some focused primarily on teachers in the tested grades; some worked mainly with plan component managers. Others worked on organizing the state-mandated ungraded primary program. Depending on their background and relationships with teachers, DEs varied in how much time they worked in classrooms with individual teachers. Similarly, DEs differed in their time spent working with principals, again depending on the needs and their particular skills. One DE, a former teacher, described her time as split evenly among work in classrooms, with teacher teams, and with the principal. The crisis schools were different insofar as one DE observed teachers for evaluation purposes and required lesson plans of all teachers; the other focused on the activities described above. Activities that some but not all DEs reported include: teaching demonstration lessons, helping teachers and students with portfolios, preparing materials for teachers, helping teachers develop curriculum units, and helping teachers set up "evidence boxes" for gathering student data.

Styles of working in schools varied considerably. In some cases DEs were primarily facilitators; in others they were more directive, particularly when site leadership was weak. Some spent time carrying out tasks themselves while others

focused more on teaching others. Their styles varied depending on the particular school context and on the skills, personalities, and backgrounds of individual DEs. One DE described playing very different roles in the two schools he worked in—one quite directive and the other “leading from behind.” A high school principal described one DE as a “seed planter,” someone who knew what he thought teachers should do to improve the school but not someone who dictated; instead he asked questions, made resources available, and led teachers to make their own decisions.

Influence of DE on Professional Development

A majority of survey respondents in all accountability categories believed that DEs had a positive impact on professional development, although more high school and middle school teachers reported a positive effect than did elementary teachers. A sizeable majority of teachers (75 percent) at all levels and in all accountability categories reported that professional development became more focused on curriculum and instruction as a result of the DE. A clear majority of teachers also reported that professional development had become more focused on the critical needs of the school and was less isolated and more integrated into other activities than previously.

Interestingly, however, only about half of the survey respondents reported that professional development had become more focused on deepening their understanding of the subject matter they teach, and less than half reported that professional development had become more relevant to issues and problems they faced in the classroom. When combined with interview data, it appears that the apparent incongruity (i.e., teachers reporting that professional development is more focused on curriculum and instruction, but not necessarily on content knowledge nor relevant to their classrooms) may be explained by the strong

focus of DEs on curriculum alignment and analysis of school and assessment data. Many teachers reported that they had spent a lot of time on these activities with DEs during faculty meetings and in other professional development activities. Thus, teachers may have felt that curriculum alignment types of professional development were more focused on curriculum and more in line with school needs, but not especially content-focused nor useful in the classroom.

The format and types of professional development in STAR schools showed some signs of moving beyond the workshop mode. For instance, teachers reported that faculty meetings were often used for professional development, and that the professional development revolved around specific school needs and occurred over a period of time. In a few schools, teachers reported that the DEs had taught in their classrooms as a way of modeling instructional practices or to give them feedback. One teacher reported: “She came in my classroom and showed me the strengths and gave me a suggestion on how to pump it up a level—very positive.” For the most part, however, we saw little use of coaching, mentoring, teacher networks, or other ongoing professional development strategies likely to influence classroom instruction or teachers’ subject-matter knowledge.

One professional development activity that occurred only in crisis schools was evaluation of classroom teachers by the DE. This was required every six months in crisis schools. About half of the teachers responding to the survey said they had been evaluated by the DE. Of this group, about two-thirds found the evaluation helpful. In the four case study crisis schools, teachers found the evaluations stressful and threatening at first. In two of the four schools, teachers became positive about the evaluation and feedback. In a third school reactions were mixed, and in the fourth quite negative: “I would hate to think my job hinged

on two days of observations.” A more positive view was expressed by a teacher in a crisis school, who compared the DE evaluation with the annual evaluation by the building principal:

I think the DE evaluation is more helpful. I'm not saying that the principal and administrative evaluation is bad, because it does give you ideas that you can use in your teaching field. But when I sit down with the DE and he tells me what I am doing wrong, he's automatically telling me how I can do something to alter it. And then he's making sure in the next evaluation that I've done that, or he's trying to find things that I've done. When you sit down with your principal or these other administrators, they label things that maybe you have done wrong, but they don't come back and follow it up by saying 'Maybe you could try teaching it this way or teaching that way.' The DEs do that.

In another crisis school, a teacher also described how much he liked the specificity of the evaluation process, particularly the scripting process used by the DEs:

Their evaluation process helps you when they start scripting. They show you your questioning technique. They show you how you draw it out of the students, how you encourage or discourage responses. They can also show you things that you are unaware that you do. When he scripted me, it astounded me. I didn't see him move but he told me every word I said, every question I asked, every answer the child gave, every gesture, facial expression, how kids reacted. It's enlightening.

Impact of the DE Program

The DE intervention was intended both to increase test scores and set the school on a path of improvement that would continue beyond the DEs' tenure. Results of the first

two-year cycle of DE intervention showed significant gains on the state assessment in all 53 schools that received assistance from a DE, with 36 schools actually meeting or exceeding their goals (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996). At the end of the second cycle, scores for 46 of these original 53 schools continued to show improvement. Of the total 188 STAR schools served during Cycle 2, 167 improved, with 85 exceeding their improvement goals. This improvement rate of 89 percent compares to the statewide rate for all schools of 77 percent. Changes in the assessment system make it impossible to track improvement for the original STAR schools beyond 1998.

Interestingly, in spite of these relatively positive test results for STAR schools, roughly half of survey respondents did not believe students had learned more as a result of having a DE in the school. At the same time, roughly two-thirds of our respondents reported that improved instruction had resulted from the DE program. This gap between “improved learning” and “improved instruction” may result from teachers' perceptions of their ability to influence learning. Just as teachers are unlikely to take responsibility for the decline in scores, they may be equally unlikely to credit themselves, with or without DE influence, with an increase in scores.

Teachers also noted that DEs had helped them implement “best practices” in their classrooms. Similarly, over half the respondents agreed that their school was more focused on student learning, and more attentive to students' academic needs, as a result of the DEs' work. A high school teacher noted: “Before, we had a school where the master schedule was the ruler. Now, the end results for the students is the ruler. I felt like we were doing a lot of good things before—but they were not focused enough.”

Improvements in leadership and collaboration were perceived by about half the respondents. Leadership sometimes referred to improvements in the principal's leadership skills, but equally often meant teachers were becoming better leaders. Collaboration usually meant that teachers were spending more time organizing, analyzing data, and planning with colleagues.

Teachers cited improved preparations for the state assessment resulting from the DE presence. Specific test preparation activities included aligning the curriculum to the content to be tested, making sure teachers/departments knew who was teaching what, analyzing test data, and preparing students for the types of questions on the test.

Whether improved test scores resulted from DE activities or associated factors such as being labeled in decline or crisis is impossible to tease out. DE actions that increased teachers' attention to assessment topics and formats, however, are likely to increase test scores. As one teacher described it:

We discovered that there were areas being tested on all the tests—KIRIS [state assessment], ACT, et cetera—that we weren't even teaching. So we had to completely change our curriculum. We discovered that our kids couldn't answer questions on concepts. They could tell you facts but they were not understanding concepts. We weren't doing enough critical thinking and not enough real life activity.

In addition to increased attention to the state assessment, educators at more than half of the schools visited reported that instructional planning and organization had improved. DEs strengthened the school improvement plan development and implementation process by organizing component committees and managers, who monitored progress and reported regularly at school council meetings. Several schools retained this participatory strategy even after the DE departed.

Overall, through an emphasis on planning and on the assessment, DEs focused faculties' attention on student learning. Wakelyn (1999) noted that the DEs he interviewed were adamant that every change in policy, school structure, and instructional practice must answer the question: How is this going to affect student learning?

Interestingly, the authority granted to DEs assigned to the nine "crisis" schools was not used to dismiss personnel. Nor did students exercise their option to transfer out of a crisis school. In our study schools, we heard only one report of a student transferring to a successful school. In this case, the student reportedly took this opportunity to transfer for sports-related reasons.

When educators were asked generally about the results of having a DE, the three most common responses focused on increased job stress or workload. The vast majority of teachers reported that they spent more time on paperwork, felt more pressure on the job, and put in more hours on the job. As one teacher wrote on the survey: "There are not enough hours in the day to possibly do everything we are told we have to do now.... Too many added duties, paperwork, meetings prevent teachers from having any time to plan."

Another teacher noted, similarly:

They [DEs] create paperwork that we as teachers complete to help them justify their jobs. This takes time away from spending time on the basic job of teaching students, lowers morale, and interferes with constructive curriculum development.

Regarding personnel changes, we did hear reports at some of our study schools that principals or teachers had voluntarily retired or transferred prior to the DEs arrival. But no teachers were terminated. At the end of the first six months, the DE program adopted the

position that six months was not enough time to identify weaknesses, develop improvement plans, mentor individuals, and observe growth. By the conclusion of the second six months, the Kentucky General Assembly was on course to revise the assessment and accountability program. The Kentucky Department of Education thought it best not to recommend terminations while this debate was occurring. A bill was subsequently passed that eliminated the "crisis" designation, so DE evaluation of personnel ceased.

Respondents Suggestions for Improving the DE Program

We asked respondents for their suggestions on ways to strengthen the STAR program. Recommendations centered on the amount of time DEs spend in a school, the match between the DE and the school, and the consistency of approach from one DE to the next.

The most common recommendation was related to the amount of time DEs spent in schools. Educators in STAR schools suggested that DEs need to spend more time in the school and in classrooms. The DEs themselves phrased this in terms of giving DEs fewer schools to assist. The problem was especially acute in schools served by DEs during the 1996-98 biennium, when there was not enough funding to provide DEs for all the schools that qualified. In addition, it was during the second biennium that some of the early appointees returned to their home districts, while new DEs rotated into the program. As a result, some schools were served by multiple DEs. Other studies of the DE program have also listed the DE shortage, and shuffling of DEs, as one of the major problems with the program (Davis, 1997, 1999; Henry, Terry, & Lunney, n.d.; Wakelyn, 1999). As one respondent put it: "To begin with when DEs are assigned to a school, they need to be consistent. Not two DEs one year and two totally different DEs the next year,

each set having totally different philosophies, and knowledge of subject areas."

Issues of match between the personality and knowledge of the DE and the school faculty were raised by several respondents. They suggested paying careful attention to the match between DEs and schools, and felt the department should choose people who were kind and supportive. A teacher on the survey raised the issue of match between the DE's background and the level of the school: "Stop assigning elementary and high-school DEs at the Middle School level. We are different, and we need people who understand the concept of middle school and understand the developmental stage of our students." In a similar vein, some teachers perceived that different DEs brought different approaches to the work. As one teacher put it:

I truly believe that if the State Department is going to have this type of program, then the participants should have the same knowledge, beliefs and strategies. How can schools be expected to improve when the state doesn't have any specific guidelines to follow for improvement? This is a very big problem with the DE program.

Other recommendations were offered. Several DEs expressed the view that they need more than two years to bring about change. A number of educators also expressed the view that the amount of paperwork required of STAR schools should be reduced.

Some of the DEs had suggestions for improving their training and preparation. DEs who had been among the early recruits expressed the view that more recent training was less intensive and meaningful, partly because it had been designed by the earlier DEs who took greater ownership because they had developed it. One DE commented in particular that there is a need to mesh the new and old training. There was also a fear that

the standards for accepting educators into the DE program had been lowered. Two DEs expressed frustration that their training had not been systematic or grounded in theory. Another noted that returning DEs to their home districts after two years hindered the mentoring of new DEs.

When the DE program was redesigned as the HSE program, a number of these concerns were addressed. We mention several in the discussion that follows.

CHALLENGES

The STAR program with its focus on school-based assistance shows an array of positive results from increases in test scores to changes in school organization, curriculum content, and professional development activities. DEs have, by and large, succeeded in getting school faculties more focused on student learning. Although public labeling of schools as declining or 'in crisis' is strongly negative, the result of receiving assistance has generally been quite positive.

However, the task of setting declining schools on a trajectory that will keep them moving ahead after the departure of the DE is substantial. In addition to many strengths, the STAR program faces three key challenges. In each case we note steps already underway to meet the challenge. The challenges are: (1) building instructional capacity; (2) maintaining a pool of strong DEs, and (3) overcoming problems external to the school.

Building Instructional Capacity. Establishing a planning process, aligning the curriculum, and paying attention to the kinds of thinking and writing assessed by the state are all major steps towards improved teaching and learning. DEs focused on these activities with good reason: they are the most likely to directly and immediately influence test scores. Unlike

'test-prep' in most states which focuses primarily on strategies and drills for multiple-choice tests, activities that require more writing, thinking, and applications of knowledge represent instructional improvement when done well. DEs also made teachers aware of a range of professional development opportunities and also provided direct assistance on curriculum and instruction.

But, in most declining schools, the long-term goal of continuous improvement requires a sustained and intensive investment in instructional leadership and teacher learning. DEs were already stretched thin. They faced a huge agenda, especially in schools with a history of failure and limited leadership for change, and the dilemma of how to invest their time across people and kinds of assistance activities. They needed to work both with the leadership and organization of the school as well as the teaching faculty. And working with the faculty, especially in a large middle or high school, meant working with a number of teachers and a number of different subject areas. In some schools, two years may be enough time to lay the groundwork for change but not enough time to build instructional capacity.

Teachers need formal opportunities to become immersed in subject-matter content as well as on-the-job opportunities for discussion, reflection, and help. Teachers need ongoing opportunities to learn new ways of thinking about teaching, and about the problems their students encounter in different subject areas. (See McDiarmid et. al., 1997 and McDiarmid, 1999). DEs could not directly provide this range of intensive learning opportunities. Hence, an essential backdrop for an effective intervention program is the existence of a statewide system of professional development that provides such opportunities.

Two current efforts begin to address these needs. The Kentucky Department of Education has created regional middle school

subject matter academies which run for a week in the summer for two successive years and provide follow-up activities and some classroom based assistance. A second effort resulted from the availability of Title I funds for eligible schools to implement comprehensive schoolwide programs which provide specific curricula and instructional approaches and assistance in their implementation. Of the sixty-six 1998-2000 group of schools with HSEs, half chose to adopt such programs. According to state officials, HSEs find such programs a benefit to their assistance efforts because they provide a structure and focus for their work on curriculum and instruction⁷.

Maintaining a Pool of Strong DEs.

Maintaining a pool of qualified educators to serve as DEs/HSEs raises challenges for the state and for districts. As respondents noted, having multiple DEs over a two-year period is not desirable. And, as DEs noted, having all or mostly new DEs every two years loses the experience and mentoring ability of those with a history in the program. At the same time, for districts to hold positions for educators working as DEs is difficult, certainly beyond two years, and without any compensation for the district. Moreover, DEs returning to their home districts have acquired a set of skills and experiences that may lead them to seek roles and responsibilities that use their new knowledge.

Of the 77 DEs who left the program, 20 returned to the same position in their district. Depending on the position, their new skills might or might not have been used. Another 17 returned to their districts in a new position that utilized their skills. Another 27 took jobs in other districts that used their skills. And 12 of the 13 who 'retired' became consultants or took jobs in another state. Although these figures are positive from the perspective of the DEs—the vast majority found employment appropriate to their skills—very few districts were able to use their former employees well. In some cases they simply did not have

appropriate positions open. In other cases, the reasons were less laudable. The exceptions—a handful of districts that have sought out and used DEs well—are worth documenting to understand how district leaders are able to take advantage of the experience of returning DEs and HSEs. The interest in STAR training that spawned the Kentucky Leadership Academy attests to the need for and relevance of these skills for those in leadership positions. (See Coe and Adams-Rodgers, 2000).

The HSE program has already incorporated several changes that speak to the need for full-time HSEs with a multi-year commitment. Each HSE is full-time in a school for two years, and the Kentucky Department of Education has proposed that the State Board extend their tenure to three years. Two-thirds of HSEs are teachers to meet the need for a stronger instructional focus. Several are 'at-large' HSEs who are regionally based, and some HSEs are assigned at the district level in districts with three or more schools in the program.

Overcoming Problems External to the

School. Our site visits to DE schools revealed some problems contributing to low performance that were unlikely to be influenced by DEs. For example, a "crisis" middle school opened after the initial assessment baseline was set by eighth graders from three different elementary schools. To add to the problem, community opposition to the opening of the middle school created factions among teachers and students. Budget problems led to a 20 percent reduction in staff and the district had been unable to make the promised improvements to the crumbling building. With five superintendents in two years, three principals at the school in the four years it had been open, and half the staff composed of beginning teachers, it would have been more surprising had the school not been in decline.

In another district, the school in decline was the least desirable workplace in the district. Hence it suffered constant turnover of faculty, for as soon as teachers and principals gained enough seniority or contacts to have a choice, they would transfer to other schools. In this case DEs wondered if it was possible to build capacity in ways that could survive constant staff turnover.

In a larger, urban district, teachers at two different high schools spoke of the difficulty they faced competing in the district's magnet program. They believed that the "best" students were attracted to two or three schools in the district, leaving the remaining high schools to try to reach high levels of achievement with less advantaged students. A DE who worked in one of these schools also felt the large district bureaucracy imposed constraints on schools that were difficult for an outsider to maneuver around: "A DE can make more ground in a smaller district than they can in this large district. The STAR program is just one little speck in this district."

Some of these problems can be addressed at the district level. Current efforts to assign HSEs to districts in addition to individual schools are part of the solution. But some are issues endemic to low-income neighborhoods and schools with little parent and community support. This suggests that in some instances, HSEs and the KDE need to work with the school council, local leaders, community organizations, and district school boards to develop approaches that speak to broader issues.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our data, consistent with other research, suggests that the STAR program has been effective in improving student test scores, and in organizing the school around a common set of curricular goals, particularly when the DEs are a regular presence in schools. This

does not confirm that DEs caused the increase in test scores, but increases are associated with their presence. Also, when DEs were carefully matched to schools and kept in place over the two-year period, they were often able to break down the initial embarrassment and fear and help schools focus on student learning. The least successful stories occurred at schools that had multiple DEs, or where constructive relationships never developed between a long-term DE and the assigned school. The most common criticism across schools was the amount of additional paperwork required of teachers.

The most effective period for Kentucky's DE program appears to have been in the first round, when only 53 schools needed the assistance of a DE, so that DEs were assigned only one or two schools. It should be noted, too, that DEs during this first cycle did not conduct personnel evaluations, nor have the authority to take personnel actions. Thus, intervention was focused almost entirely on helping the school and its staff improve, rather than on sanctioning those who failed to do so. School staff remained motivated by sanctions during this first cycle, however, because they knew that if their scores failed to improve, they could be declared "in crisis" during the next cycle. However, the fact that the response to DEs of educators in decline schools differed little from those in crisis schools suggests that the threat of job loss may be unnecessary.

The presence of an educator solely committed to improving student learning and knowing various strategies to that end represents a resource that many teachers welcome and use—even when it includes teacher evaluation and feedback. In most schools, administrators are tied up with daily operations and routine demands, and have little time to observe classes and talk to teachers—and often little background for playing this role. DEs therefore represent a vast increase in resources dedicated to improving teaching and learning.

We derive a number of policy implications from this work, precisely because our findings convince us that the approach has considerable strengths and promise.

- The STAR/DE program provided two resources in short supply in many schools: technical knowledge of how to reorganize faculty, curriculum, and instruction to improve student performance, and leadership in focusing on student learning to the exclusion of competing demands on teachers' attention. The threat of sanctions appears largely unimportant in how teachers regarded and used these resources.
- DEs were most effective when they were: fulltime in a school, in the same school for two years, and well-matched to the school. The current HSE program has already incorporated these ideas, including a willingness to shift HSEs when relationships do not seem productive. A more formal probationary period, during which the school and the HSE evaluate the fit, might be worth considering.
- The evaluation model in the crisis schools appeared to be stronger and more instructionally focused than those used by districts; yet there was no mechanism for districts or even principals to learn about this. The Kentucky Department of Education might consider sponsoring workshops for district and school administrations on this approach to evaluation and even offer grants to induce districts to re-examine their approach to teacher evaluation.
- To meet the need for a standing cadre of HSEs, the KDE might consider creating an independent network with permanent positions, or perhaps positions at each Regional Service Center, with four-year terms rather than drawing HSEs each round from current district staff.

- The possibility that comprehensive school-wide projects facilitate the work of HSEs by providing clear instructional direction, structure, and content is worthy of serious investigation. If schools with these projects show more evidence of success than similar schools without, coupling HSEs with a program intervention might provide an alternative and perhaps more effective and efficient mechanism for instructional improvement than an approach that asks teachers to develop their own curriculum.
- In addition to their work directly with school leaders and teachers, DEs/HSEs play an important brokering role—matching faculty needs with available professional development opportunities. Such professional development opportunities are increasing but are still limited. State efforts to expand the options for high-quality professional development for teachers need to continue for HSEs to play this role effectively.

In sum, despite the list of recommendations for changes above, the DE program, by and large, accomplished the goals for which it was designed. In particular, DEs provided curricular and instructional focus and technical support to declining schools, most of which, demonstratively, needed both. By providing such focus and support, they contributed, in many schools, to improving the quality of professional development for teachers. That some of the DEs did not establish constructive relationships in the schools to which they were assigned seems almost inevitable. Not all DEs possess the requisite interpersonal skills to work effectively in challenging political environments just as not all teachers are prepared to accept the ideas and leadership of “outsiders.” The important news is that the program seems to have benefited many schools, not that a few DEs failed to meet expectations.

END NOTES

¹ "Decline" refers to those schools whose scores declined less than 5 points. "STAR2" applies only to 1996-98 and refers to those schools that remained in the STAR program after the first cycle (those not meeting their improvement goal). Improving Category 2 schools include those that improved during both cycles but still did not meet their goal.

² In 1998-2000 66 of 73 eligible schools accepted HSE assistance. For 2000-2002 all eligible schools accepted HSEs.

³ These programmatic changes in the HSE program were part of a larger set of legislative changes designed to revamp the state assessment system in response to complaints about reliability, scoring, burden, and lack of norms.

⁴ From 1991 through 1998, a school's accountability status was based on a comparison of different cohorts of students. For instance, the initial baseline was established in 1992 by testing fourth, eighth, and 12th graders. In 1993 and 1994, these same grade levels were tested and their performance compared against the baseline to determine if schools had made progress. A new baseline was then established and schools were given two more years to show a specified amount of progress. Many educators felt this system was unfair because it compared different cohorts of students, rather than tracking progress of the same cohort over time.

⁵ The STAR program provided approximately \$2.5 million for each biennium, allocated to schools based on enrollment and approval of activities by the Educational Improvement Advisory Committee (which was eliminated in the 1998 legislation).

⁶ The Core Content for Assessment describes the content that is the basis for the state assessment; it represents what students are expected to know.

⁷ This is consistent with the experiences of several researchers who participated in the Partnership for Kentucky School's Conference on Interventions in Low-Performing Schools. See David 1999.

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and elementary schools (101 or 19 percent). This is as we should expect since decline schools constitute 65 percent of the sample and middle schools 44 percent.

The low response rate appears to reflect several conditions. The Kentucky reforms have been the focus of intense national interest since their inception. As a consequence, Kentucky educators appear to be suffering, understandably, from research fatigue. In addition, written comments on some returned surveys indicated that teachers in some schools were reluctant to respond to some items, fearing that colleagues or supervisors would learn of their views. Whatever the reason, the low response rate urges caution in drawing generalizations from the survey results alone.

Data from the surveys were entered into a computer data base and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Differences among schools by level and accountability category were analyzed using the Chi-square test of statistical significance.

ATTACHMENT 1

Survey Design and Sample

The schools were selected using a stratified random sample method in which schools were stratified by level (elementary, middle, and high schools) and accountability category (crisis, decline, and STAR2). A 40 percent sample was chosen from each cell. For cells which contained 10 or fewer schools, all schools were included in the final sample.

The research team worked closely with the Kentucky Education Association (KEA) to develop the survey forms, and, as a result, included several items of particular interest to KEA. The survey was pretested with KEA representatives and revised according to their comments. KEA representatives in each of the 55 sample schools distributed and collected the survey forms in the spring of 1999.

Response rates varied considerably from school to school. The overall response rate of 28 percent reflected responses from 526 teachers. The majority of the 526 respondents, 375 or 71 percent, were at decline schools.; 80 (15 percent) were at STAR2 schools; and 71 (14 percent) at crisis schools. Similarly, middle school teachers constitute a majority of teachers responding (266 or 51 percent, followed by high schools (159 or 30 percent)

